The Unbalanced Structure of College Football Causing Competitive (Im)balance: A Social Network Approach

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As competitive balance plays a critical role in the demand for a sport competition (i.e., fan interest) (Borland & MacDonald, 2004), sport conferences and leagues seek to maintain and leverage the tension of competitiveness. While scholars recognize the unbalanced competition structure in college football and its potential adverse effect on competitive imbalance, they still debate whether this issue can be resolved (Sanderson, 2002). This ongoing debate can be, in part, caused by a lack of empirical research to analyze the competition structure. To fill this gap, the current research attempts to derive empirical evidence that specifies (1) the unbalanced competition structure in college football causing competitive imbalance and (2) the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital originating from the unbalanced competition structure, using a social network approach.

The dynamics of the competition structure and its associated social capital can be investigated by adopting two approaches of social network theory: a structural and relational approach (Valente, 2010). The structural approach represents the patterns of existing connections and interconnectedness among actors in networks of exchange relations, whereas the relational approach uses measures of each connection's property, strength, and flow among the actors in a network. In this study, the structural approach can probe the patterns of competition between the teams and conferences in each season and over the years. The relational approach is applicable to examining how the structure facilitates or impedes the distribution of social capital or power between the teams and conferences.

Prior studies highlighted the critical role of relationship networks in creating actual or potential social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This social capital was further conceptualized into the three dimensions including structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Applied into the context of the current study, we examine social capital originating from the competition structure using a social network approach. Specifically, the structural dimension will manifest through the number of games between teams. The relational and cognitive dimensions will consist of the previous performance records and market-related records.

Data analysis, using social network analysis, is in progress. Data is collected by retrieving every pair of competition between Division-I collegiate football teams during the past five years. Previous performance records (i.e., win-loss records, playoff, bowl game, and national championship appearance) are extracted to examine the social capital originating from the competition structure. Additionally, market-related records (i.e., social media followers and total attendance records) are calculated as a proxy for fan interest and demand.

Analyzing the attributes of teams, conferences, and their connections is expected to reveal the power of the competition structure and its associated social capital. Accordingly, the findings will contribute to existing knowledge by identifying the competition structure associated with social capital and providing an initial foundation for future social network-based research in the sector of demand for sport. Furthermore, the findings will provide the practitioners with fruitful insights into how to manage leagues and games by showing that social capital originating from competition structure can serve as a surrogate measure of fan interest and demand.